

# Jews of Russia Move Back to the Soil

By ANNA LOUISE STRONG

Relief worker and newspaper correspondent who has been in Russia for several years

THE drive of the Jews to the land in South Russia has all the force of one of the great elemental movements of nature. Foreign philanthropy has nothing to do with stimulating it, but only comes in on the edges to assist in efficient organization and to succor the starving. For the driving force is hunger, and the instinct to escape from extinction. Yet in the end it may lead to great economic, social, political results for the Jews not only of Russia, but of all Eastern Europe.

As yet few people realize its reality or permanence—so novel is the turning of the Jewish people to farming. The peasants among whom they come look at them incredulously. The inhabitants of the nearby city of Odessa stare their wonder when you tell them that thousands of Jews in their own State are even now establishing themselves painfully upon the soil. History for a thousand years has seen no such mass movement, comparable to the great migrations which settled Europe.

I passed in the Fall through a dozen or more of these new Jewish colonies, in the province of Odessa, traveling with the agricultural director of local relief. I saw the Jews plowing the blueblack fields of Southern Ukraine as late as Nov. 20, when the Ukrainian peasants had long since gone indoors against the cold, leaving their earth to shift for itself till Spring. The Jewish farmers were sleeping in the open, or in dugouts or straw shelters, preparing the land for the Spring sowing, since their agriculturist told them this was a better method than to leave it unplowed as the lazier peasants did.

I saw the Jewish families crowded nine to twelve per room in the outbuildings of these more settled Ukrainian peasants, who were reaping a tiny golden harvest from barn rents. These Jewish pioneers had broken all ties with the towns they came from; they were camping even in hired stables or in dugouts, in the hope that some day, not too distant, they might have suffi-

cient harvest to build a mud hut, and later a stone cottage of their own.

I have seen also the towns the Jewish farmers come from and I know why they come, flocking in ever-increasing numbers to the free lands of Southern Ukraine and Northern Crimea. Those little towns are places of death and desolation. Even before the war they could not support their miserable population, which competed itself below the level of subsistence and sent off emigrants to America by tens of thousands. Shut off by Czardom from the capitals, the universities, the big industrial towns, and from land ownership, except in those few farm settlements started a hundred years ago in the south of Russia, the Jewish population was doomed to become a people of petty traders and small artisans, struggling unsuccessfully against the march of modern methods of factory production and chain store development. The fact that the chain store development of today, which pushes them to the wall, is owned by the Government or by a cooperative society, makes no difference in the basic situation—a situation bound to arrive with large scale methods of either production or distribution.

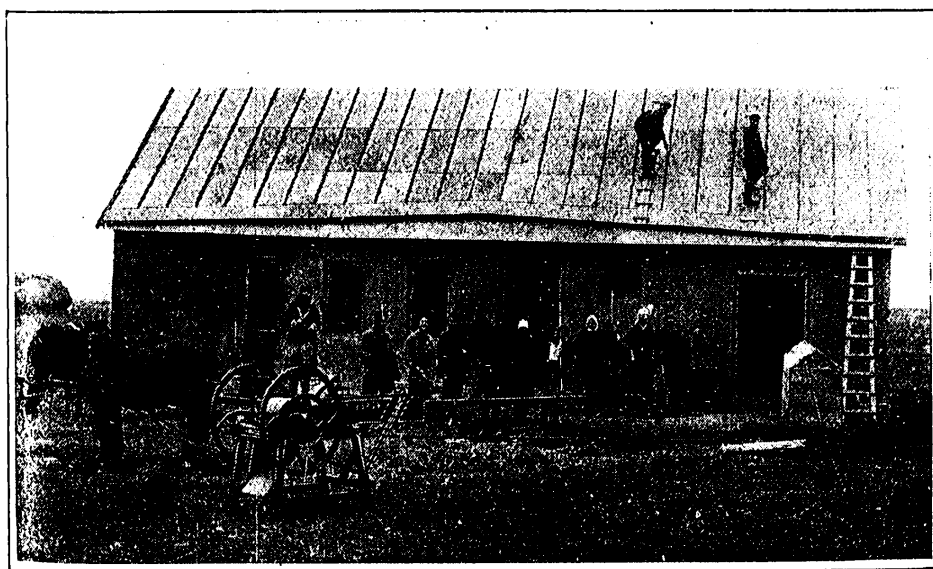
More than half the Jews of old Russia were traders, usually on a beggarly scale. Most of the remainder were small artisans, fighting the losing battle of the artisan with the machine. Bad as was their condition before 1914, war and revolution made it infinitely worse. They underwent pogroms that slew perhaps 200,000 in direct slaughter and starved many thousands indirectly. After the revolution they found themselves free and equal citizens of the Soviet Republics, entitled to take up lands and go into factories and universities on the same basis as all citizens. But this same Soviet Government was passionately pushing large scale State industry and cooperative retail distribution direct to peasant villages. The little Jewish towns were politically free, but economically they

were ruined. "The worst of it is," said a Jewish student of the problem, "that the more the country improves, the more they will be ruined. There is still a tiny chance for these middlemen, since Government shops and cooperatives do not yet run smoothly. But the faster general organization improves, the faster we middlemen go to the wall. Our trading towns were abnormal anyway; as the country grows normal with good distribution" — he put his hands to his throat and made a choking pantomime to indicate what would happen to the small Jewish trader.

So the broken windows of the empty shops are covered with boards because there is neither money nor incentive for repair. A survey made by the students in the Gomel Soviet School during their vacation summed up the situation: "There are many more tradesmen than people who buy. Only a few have regular work; the rest are beggared. \* \* \* Jewish agricultural collections to take up land were organized last year in all the places we investigated. There would be more if the land were nearer or if there were help to reach it. There is no need to make propaganda for farming. The need is to hold back those who cannot feed themselves till harvest."

The Jewish movement toward the land

organizes itself into working groups, or artels, which usually combine into a larger community of half a dozen artels, capable of maintaining its own schoolhouse. This type of organization is especially favored by the Soviets and by relief societies; and no single Jewish family is strong enough to establish itself without aid. The extreme poverty is unbelievable to an American. There is one plow for three or four families, one wagon for six or seven families. These working groups are organized before they leave the towns. They send out their representatives to look for land. A tall, young Jewish farmer, standing at the door of his still unfinished stone hut in the biting November wind, told me how he organized his group: "I come from a small town near Kiev. I have no trade. For I served five years under Nicholas and five in a German prison camp. When I came home my people, who once were rich, were ruined. The bandit bands had been seven times looting through our town. Every one else was ruined also. So I called a meeting in the theatre and said: 'It is impossible to live as we are. Brother cheats brother, and we all lie to the tax collector; yet the taxes eat us up. This same Government which hinders our trading opens the right to land. Let us take up land and live by honest work.'" Sev-



The house of a "collective" in process of construction

enty-three families signed as members of the new agricultural organization and sent the young secretary out to look for land.

#### A SPONTANEOUS MOVEMENT

The first move of the Jews to the land was spontaneous, unguided by government or relief organizations. They held meetings, organized and went to the local authorities for the right to the soil which is granted to all citizens. But rapidly under their pressure the vacant lands near the Jewish towns gave out. It was necessary to go further afield to the Southern Ukraine. So the farmers' organizations sent out delegates, the young secretary who was telling me his experiences went from Kiev to Odessa and found what he wanted. Here in the South six acres was allowed to every "eater," whereas in the crowded Northern Ukraine there is barely enough land for two acres per person.

In this way the Jewish agricultural population, which before the war had been about 50,000 and which in the famine year sank as low as 20,000, shot up again to 60,000, and then went on climbing until now it is estimated as close to 130,000.

Under this pressure the Government and the various relief societies took a hand. Something had to be done to bring order out of chaos—Jewish delegates wandering

hither and thither in search of land; Jewish colonists, men, women and children, stranded by famine, sometimes simply camped down on land and working it before it was legally theirs. About this time Bragan, a Jewish farmer and consulting expert in the Department of Agriculture, began writing about a Jewish Republic which might arise on the shores of the Black Sea. The worried relief societies told him to keep still or he would get them into trouble, and the Soviet Government formed a special Commission for Settling Jews on Land.

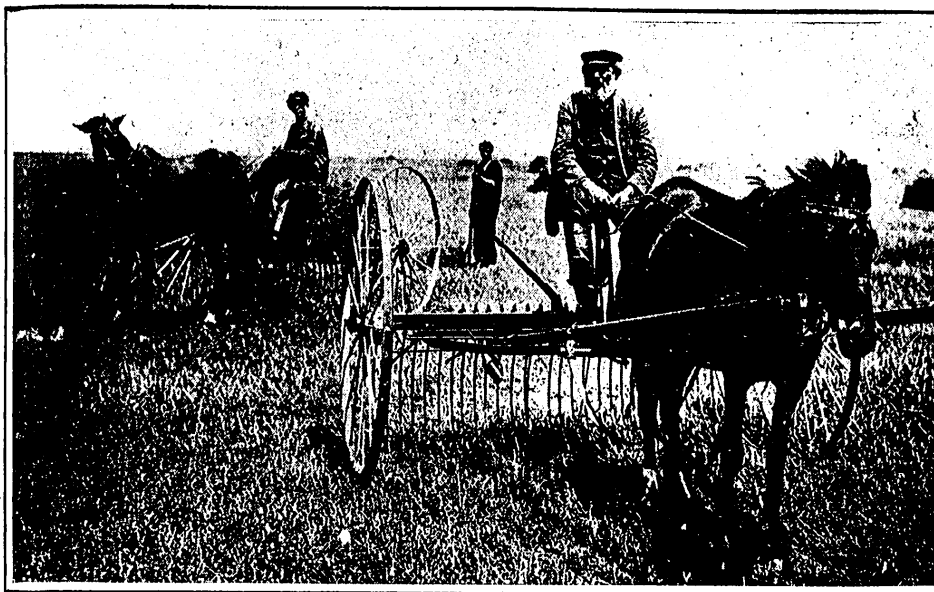
Mikhail Kalenin, the Soviet President, in an interview with Elias Tobenkin, Russian correspondent for *The New York Herald Tribune*, outlined his sympathetic and constructive policy toward the Jews of Russia: "I feel the tragedy of the Jewish people keenly," M. Kalenin said. "All of us in the Government do. The Jews are among our oldest inhabitants, yet each successive Czarist Government prevented them from taking root in the soil. They were forbidden to own land, rent land, work land. We do not like to be charged with fostering a policy that is partial to the Jewish people, but we are determined to make it possible for the Jews to grow together with the soil of Russia the same as all other nationalities.

"I would like to see a Jewish republic established in Russia, in Siberia," continued the President. "It need not be a very big republic—half a million people would do. Nor need the whole of this half million population be exclusively landworkers. Such a Jewish republic could very well consist of a combination of peasants, with home artisans and skilled mechanics."

The Government offered free land; \$10,000,000 was the pre-war value of lands which have already been settled by Jews. It gave transportation to people and freight at a rate so low as to be practically free, also seed, timber and frequently loans of money. The Special Commission takes up with the various provinces and autonomous republics the question



These hardy young girls are doing their share of the rough pioneer work



A Jewish colonist and his two sons working their field

of what lands can be spared and in what localities. All told, 260,000 acres are at present assigned or in process of survey for definite assignment. But the program of the Special Commission contemplates 3,000,000 acres during the next few years, as the Jews settle the South Ukraine and move on toward the Northern Caucasus. In order to avoid friction with the local peasants, who will themselves wish to expand their holdings as they get better implements, the Jewish settlement is limited to about one-tenth of the total available land fund in any given area. Even so the acreage planned for Jewish colonization can hold in the next few years 500,000 people, or about one-sixth of the total Jewish population in the Soviet Union. If these can be settled on farms the rest can perhaps find places in industry and trade; or, if the drive to the land should still persist, there is Siberia, hardly available now to such poverty-stricken settlers, but richly open to those who have once gained experience and a little capital.

The lands to which the Jews are moving now are beautiful; mile after mile I traveled across them, great slopes of purple-brown crossed by the blue-black of plowed fields—sweeping up to a cloudless sky and a treeless horizon. Plowing goes on as late as the end of November—in the Crimea

even into December. Only the lack of moisture prevents two crops a year.

Gay looking little villages appear around the curves of valleys, with stone or mud houses whitewashed or painted sky blue, green or orange. There being practically no trees, the houses are built of the hard mud, strengthened with chopped straw and baked into bricks by ten months of clear sun. The roofs are of thatch or rainbow-colored tile. Gay looking are the Ukrainian villages, but the life in them is not gay. Primitive methods of culture result in these dry steppes in crop failure every three or four years. The village school is just beginning to take root in a few of them. In the white and blue houses children huddle indoors all Winter for lack of outdoor clothing. When I drove through in late November the chief sign of life was furnished by irrepressible boys of 14 and 15, who ran madly after the automobile without the slightest expectation of catching it.

Into this village district come the Jewish colonists. The first Summer the men come, plowing and sowing the land, and returning for the Winter to the shelter of the towns. The second Summer come the families, building perhaps a few houses, renting barns or shacks from the Ukrainians, or even, when too far away from Ukrainian villages for this, building dug-outs for shelter. Already, even in their

newness and poverty, they are introducing better methods of cultivating the soil. "We have 400 acres sown with Winter grains and 200 plowed for the Spring sowing," said the organizer of one small community to me. "The peasants near by have not plowed this Fall a single acre for Spring. We have also introduced the six-field system as our agriculturist taught us, planting with varied crops so that we do not have to depend on one. This saved us during the year of crop failure, for the wheat and rye were ruined, but the sun-flowers and corn pulled us through." The community of which this man was organizer was named Labor. All these organizations give themselves significant names; there are, for example, Glory, Light, Red Reaper, New Era, Free Labor, Work Lovers and others called less cheerfully Plow and Landless.

"How do you get on with the peasants?" I asked again and again across the country of the Jewish colonists. "We do not know

how they feel in their hearts," answered one cautious woman, "but they are friendly in their actions." Others said that at first the peasants were annoyed at the influx of strangers, but that, little by little, "when we were both longingly watching the sky for rain together," they came to accept these newcomers, saying in praise of them that "they work as well as the Germans." Than this there is no higher or kinder praise from a Russian peasant.

Under the heavy pressure of pioneer need individual life with its infinite variety persists. I remember three different women whom I saw on the same day. One a bride of a few months, wife of the leader of a band of seventy families. Her one-roomed stone hut, shining spotless with whitewash, was an aspiration toward beauty and light, here in the drudgery of a hardly established settlement. Twin brass beds brought reminiscences of the town; the family portraits were neatly ranged on a table. Even the hoops of brown onions drying above the great white peasant stove looked like ornamental festoons, they had been placed with such care. It was the cleanest and best house in the district; she was the best housekeeper. Yet the house was bought at price, costing only \$250, not extravagant, certainly, according to American views for a honeymoon home, but so extravagant according to the standards of this settlement that this one expense had wiped out the savings of the family. Now that the first harvest had failed, the man was reduced to asking charity in order to buy a horse and a cow.

Another woman colonist I saw was of a different type. Gaunt and brown, she was standing in leather boots and close-drawn shawl, working with the men in a vast depression which was to be made into a pond, so that in dry seasons the cattle might yet live on the seepage from the hills. "I am a member of the collective in my own right," she told me. "My husband and father and brother were killed in pogroms. I had no money and no horse and no cow, but they let me join the collective. Of my four children two—boys of seventeen and fifteen—can work. But I am the working head of the family." And she bent again to her spade.



The settlers begin planting vines for new vineyards before they start to build their homes

Still another woman I remember, a worn mother with five small children. Nine people, including her husband and his brother, lived in a one-room outbuilding on



An open-air school. The teacher is also a colonist

the premises of a Ukrainian peasant, a dismal shack, hardly worth the \$13 rent for a six months' season which the peasant charged. Uneven dirt floor, littered with pieces of wood; lumpy beds of straw on wood, each planned for three or four occupants. Next morning I saw her twenty miles away in a market town to which she had walked in the hope of procuring a cow which the credit society had promised to nine members of her collective. From 2 o'clock in the chill of a November morning she had trudged with only a thin shawl over her shoulders. But the peasants discovered the crowd of buyers, and the price of cows rose from \$22 to more than \$25, and the credit society decided to buy on another day. Four families had their cows, but the rest were returning empty handed. The woman walked beside me, complaining, not bitterly, but with resignation, that again there would be no milk for the children; that the wind leaked into the house and the children would be cold and get sick. "Do you want to go back to the town?" I asked her. She looked neither eager nor averse. "What is there to go back to?" she said. "My own life is evil everywhere. But my children will have land!" A half-subdued glow came into her eyes as she spoke these words.

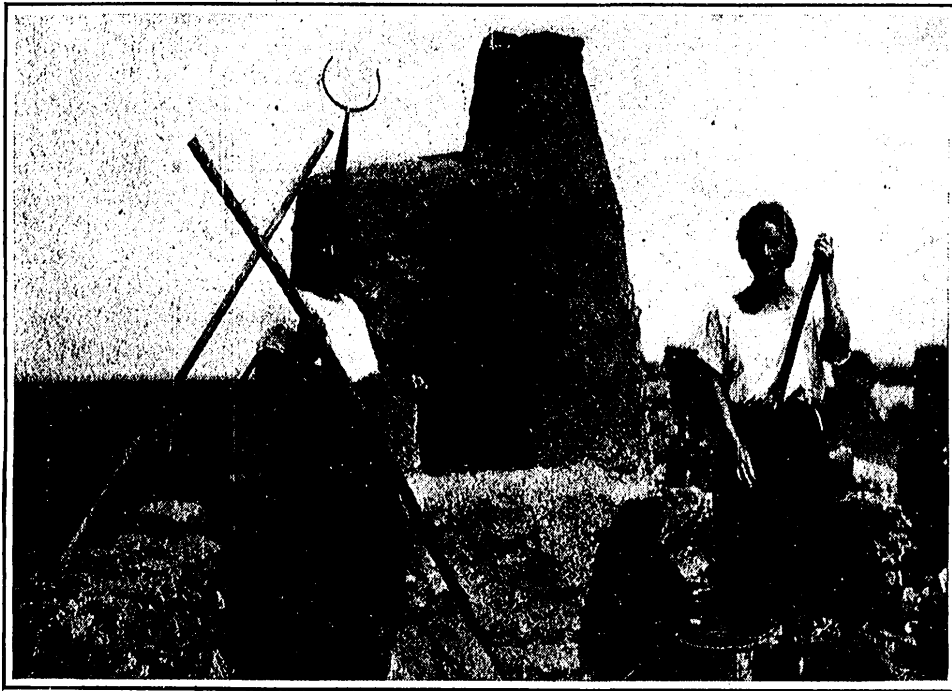
That is what keeps them all going, under

conditions as hard as ever faced pioneers. Their children, the offspring of a homeless race, will have homes. If they succeed they will give a solid basis of land occupation to a people which, since it was in Palestine two thousand years ago, has been only a paying guest in the lands of other people. It may even prove, some enthusiasts think, a way out for many of the 8,000,000 Jews of Eastern Europe, who are now ground between the millstones of the little nations, and of whom a prominent American Jew told me hopelessly that "half are doomed." Perhaps, after all, they are not doomed. Abraham Bragan recently prophesied a Jewish republic along the shores of the Black Sea, taking in parts of Southern Ukraine and Northern Crimea, with Odessa remaining a Ukrainian port but a Jewish university centre, and Kherson as possible capital for the new State. And this prophecy was fulfilled when the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Government issued a degree legalizing the appropriation of a portion of the district of Kherson in the Ukraine for the establishment of an autonomous Jewish Soviet republic within the Soviet Union.

Most of the Jews fight shy of politics, saying that it only harms them. It is in the name of politics they have always been slain in the past. "We are doing it merely to keep from starving," they say, "and not



Delivering food to the workers on the steppes.



Preparing to take the bread out of the oven. These girls are typical of the younger generation of settlers

to found a Soviet Palestine or any other dream." Yet for all that republics have been born in the past out of the grim hunger of pioneers. Larin, the well-known Russian statistician, writes: "If the Jewish masses should want it, if they actually go to the land in great numbers and populate comparatively new territory, the formation of a republic is absolutely assured on the same basis as are created all the autonomous republics that are now part of the Soviet Union."

Under the conditions of wide local autonomy on cultural matters which prevail in Russia, the growth of the new Jewish republic is not impracticable. Nor does it put any strain upon the present political methods of Russia. The Jewish settlers already are encouraged to organize in working groups, combined in villages large enough to support a village school. When possible, it is already planned to place several of these villages near enough to each other to support a common high school. All such villages have autonomy in lan-

guage, choice of school teacher and local customs. A district such as the 80,000 acres near Kherson is already enough to constitute a "rayon," an administrative district of the Ukraine, with many of the functions of a sovereign State. "Republic," after all, is merely a name; there are smaller republics already in the Soviet Union than this region near Kherson. The important fact just now among the Jewish population is neither politics nor power nor autonomy, but saving themselves from death by getting food from the soil. There are 6,000,000 acres of free land that border the Black Sea, and 8,000,000 Jews in unstable equilibrium in Eastern Europe, in Poland, Rumania, the Balkans, as well as in Russia. The doors are closed toward the great cities of America. But the doors are open for some of them, and may perhaps open yet wider, toward great free lands in Russia, where the Jewish pioneers, pushing in by tens of thousands, are digging and starving and struggling and building a new home for their children.